

excerpts from
'No Death, No Fear'

by Thich Nhat Hanh

"When conditions are sufficient things manifest."

"When we understand that we cannot be destroyed, we are liberated from fear."

"Walking slowly in the moonlight through the rows of tea plants, I noticed my mother was still with me."

"Just because we do not perceive something, it is not correct to say it doesn't exist."



In my hermitage in France there is a bush of japonica, Japanese quince. The bush usually blossoms in the spring, but one winter it had been quite warm and the flower buds had come early. During the night a cold snap arrived and brought with it frost. The next day while doing walking meditation, I noticed that all the buds on the bush had died. I recognized this and thought, This New Year we will not have enough flowers to decorate the altar of the Buddha.

A few weeks later the weather became warm again. As I walked in my garden I saw new buds on the japonica manifesting another generation of flowers. I asked the japonica flowers: "Are you the same as the flowers that died in the frost or are you different flowers?" The flowers replied to me: "Thay, we are not the same and we are not different. When conditions are sufficient we manifest and when conditions are not we go into hiding. It's as simple as that."

This is what the Buddha taught. When conditions are sufficient things manifest. When conditions are no longer sufficient things withdraw. They wait until the moment is right for them to manifest again.

Before giving birth to me, my mother was pregnant with another baby. She had a miscarriage, and that person wasn't born. When I was young I used to ask the question: was that my brother or was that me? Who was trying to manifest at that time? If a baby has been lost it means that conditions were not enough for him to manifest and the child has decided to withdraw in order to wait for better conditions. "I had better withdraw; I'll come back again soon, my dearest." We have to respect his or her will. If you see the world with eyes like this, you will suffer much less. Was it my brother that my mother lost? Or maybe I was about to come out but instead I said, "It isn't time yet," so I withdrew.

Becoming Nothing

Our greatest fear is that when we die we will become nothing. Many of us believe that our entire existence is only a life span beginning the moment we are born or conceived and ending the moment we die. We believe that we are born from nothing and when we die we become nothing. And so we are filled with fear of annihilation.

The Buddha has a very different understanding of our existence. It is the understanding that birth and death are notions. They are not real. The fact that we think they are true makes a powerful illusion that causes our suffering. The Buddha taught that there is no birth; there is no death; there is no coming; there is no going; there is no same; there is no different; there is no permanent self; there is no annihilation. We only think there is. When we understand that we cannot be destroyed, we are liberated from fear. It is a great relief. We can enjoy life and appreciate it in a new way.

Finding a Lost Loved One

The same thing happens when we lost any of our beloved ones. When conditions are not right to support life, they withdraw. When I lost my mother I suffered a lot. When we are only seven or eight years old it is difficult to think

that one day we will lose our mother. Eventually we grow up and we all lose our mothers, but if you know how to practice, when the time comes for the separation you will not suffer too much. You will very quickly realize that your mother is always alive within you.

The day my mother died, I wrote in my journal, "A serious misfortune of my life has arrived." I suffered for more than one year after the passing away of my mother. But one night, in the highlands of Vietnam, I was sleeping in the hut in my hermitage. I dreamed of my mother. I saw myself sitting with her, and we were having a wonderful talk. She looked young and beautiful, her hair flowing down. It was so pleasant to sit there and talk to her as if she had never died. When I woke up it was about two in the morning, and I felt very strongly that I had never lost my mother. The impression that my mother was still with me was very clear. I understood then that the idea of having lost my mother was just an idea. It was obvious in that moment that my mother is always alive in me.

I opened the door and went outside. The entire hillside was bathed in moonlight. It was a hill covered with tea plants, and my hut was set behind the temple halfway up. Walking slowly in the moonlight through the rows of tea plants, I noticed my mother was still with me. She was the moonlight caressing me as she had done so often, very tenderly, very sweet... wonderful! Each time my feet touched the earth I knew my mother was there with me. I knew this body was not mine along but a living continuation of my mother and father and my grandparents and great-grandparents. Of all my ancestors. These feet that I saw as "my" feet were actually "our" feet. Together my mother and I were leaving footprints in the damp soil.

From that moment on the idea that I had lost my mother no longer existed. All I had to do was look at the palm of my hand, feel the breeze on my face or the earth under my feet to remember that my mother is always with me, available at any time.

When you lost a loved one, you suffer. but if you know how to look deeply, you have a chance to realize that his or her nature is truly the nature of no birth, no death. There is manifestation and there is the cessation of manifestation in order to have another manifestation. You have to be very keen and very alert in order to recognize the new manifestation of just one person. But with practice and with effort you can do it.

So, taking the hand of someone who knows the practice, together do walking meditation. Pay attention to all the leaves, the flowers, the birds and the dewdrops. If you can stop and look deeply, you will be able to recognize your beloved one manifesting again and again in different forms. You will again embrace the joy of life.

Nothing Is Born, Nothing Dies

A French scientist, whose name is Lavoisier, declared, "*Rien ne se cree, rien ne se perd.*" "Nothing is born, nothing dies." Although he did not practice as a Buddhist but as a scientist, he found the same truth the Buddha discovered.

Our true nature is the nature of no birth and no death. Only when we touch our true nature can we transcend the fear of non-being, the fear of annihilation.

The Buddha said that when conditions are sufficient something manifests and we say it exists. When one or two conditions fail and the thing does not manifest in the same way, we then say it does not exist. According to the Buddha, to qualify something as existing or not existing is wrong. In reality, there is no such thing as totally existing or totally not existing.

We can see this very easily with television and radio. We may be in a room that has no television or radio. And while we are in that room, we may think that television programs and radio programs do not exist in that room. But all of us know that the space in the room is full of signals. The signals of these programs are filling the air everywhere. We need only one more condition, a radio or television set, and many forms, colors and sounds will appear.

It would have been wrong to say that the signals do not exist because we did not have a radio or television to receive and manifest them. They only seemed not to exist because the causes and conditions were not enough to make the television program manifest. So at that moment, in that room, they do not exist. Just because we do not perceive something, it is not correct to say it doesn't exist. It is only our notion of being and non-being that makes us think something exists or doesn't exist. Notions of being and non-being cannot be applied to reality.

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